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ABSTRACT

A collaborative project of Bank Street College and the Newark Public Schools, the New Beginnings initiative was designed to bring about progressive restructuring of kindergarten classrooms. This study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the impact of the initiative on curriculum, professional development, and student outcomes in its first year. Participating were 16 kindergarten teachers and their students from 16 schools. Bank Street staff acted as mentors to participating teachers. Other learning experiences included visits to model classes and workshops. The multicultural curriculum for the students was organized in integrated thematic units, with classrooms organized as learning environments around nonpermanent learning centers. Teachers participated in focus groups and completed surveys regarding program impact. Findings indicated that New Beginnings students exhibited greater autonomy and ownership of their learning, were better able to work independently and in groups, and developed skills which enabled them to negotiate and resolve peer conflict. Findings also showed statistically significant gains on standardized reading and math tests compared to a control group. The collaborative mentoring model worked well for teachers with different teaching philosophies, methodological approaches, and teaching styles, and for students with varied abilities and developmental readiness. Teachers adapted their roles and teaching styles, and learned new ways to allow children to participate more fully in classroom routines. Although activity centers and child-centered learning were widely adopted, the theme-based social studies curriculum was unevenly implemented. Conflicts and constraints experienced with the new approaches included problematic styles of classroom management and organization. (KB)

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Restructuring Kindergarten in an Urban School District: The Case of Newark, New Jersey

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Restructuring Kindergarten in an Urban School District: The Case of Newark, New Jersey

Introduction

Early childhood programs have become a focal point of educational reform. Although goals of national policy initiatives like Goals 2000 emphasize that all children be prepared for school by age 5, there is little consensus and few research documented examples of the types of kindergarten that work to accomplish this. Some reform kindergarten curriculums emphasize more academic content and structure; others, such as Newark's Project New Beginnings, stress curriculum goals and staff development that stimulate child-centered learning in all developmental areas: physical, social, emotional and cognitive. As urban school districts increasingly undergo restructuring, it is important to more fully understand why only some reform efforts succeed.

This paper discusses some of the contributing factors to a successful model of kindergarten restructuring in its first year of implementation in an urban school district, suggesting that its success is based on developmentally appropriate curriculum and expectations, intensive staff development, and school and district-wide administrative support. As a result of a New Jersey State takeover in 1995, the Newark Public Schools is undergoing extensive educational reform and has developed a strategic plan outlining priorities to improve student performance and provide quality education. The District's goal is "to educate every child as a responsible citizen able to contribute to society." To meet the objective of implementing "models of excellence" for early childhood programs, in 1996-97 the District increased the number of kindergartens to 174 full day programs. The District also collaborated with the Bank Street College of Education on Project New Beginnings to create sixteen model kindergartens, three of which are bilingual. This project is part of an ongoing three-year process to effect reform in the areas of curriculum, professional development, classroom management and student assessment.

The description of at-risk students typically is applied to older students already experiencing academic failure within the formal educational system. However, many pre-schoolers come from economically disadvantaged families. Often these are single parent households with parents or guardians who have low expectations of the educational system based upon their own poor educational experiences and outcomes. Newark is a school system with high mobility, a high school drop-out rate, academic performance below national norms, 44% of children living in single-parent households, and according to 1990 census statistics, 37% of children existing below the poverty level. Almost one-fifth of Newark's children are born to teenage mothers. The educational problems which confront at-risk families have been appropriately viewed as symptoms of a system which has failed to allow all people to assume full rights and exercise full options as American citizens. Many at-risk individuals never develop self-esteem or the sense of belonging that would enable them to participate productively in larger communities.

Project New Beginnings is an extensive effort to restructure Newark's early childhood classrooms to provide a network of resources and supports to the Newark Public Schools as the larger restructuring effort continues. Based on Bank Street's "developmental-interaction" approach and the work of a number of theorists (among them Dewey, Erikson, Freud, Piaget, and Vigotsky), key features include: process and child-centered, rather than didactic and teacher-directed learning, collaborative mentoring methods of staff development, theme-based social-science driven curriculum and multiple performance-based assessment methods that capture individual patterns of growth and development.

In the first year, the primary emphasis of New Beginnings was to provide staff development and curricular support to teachers, administrators, and parents in sixteen different schools throughout Newark's ethnic and economically diverse population. As part of an evaluation conducted by the Office of Planning, Evaluation and Testing of the Newark Public Schools, the research presented in this paper focused on changes in program and curriculum development, changes in teacher attitudes and behavior and changes in student outcomes. The study's findings demonstrate the effectiveness of this model for transforming teacher-directed classrooms into child-centered ones, for revitalizing teachers through staff development, and for improving student outcomes. Student outcomes were assessed by teacher perceptions of observed growth in social skills and gains in test scores on acquisition of reading and math skills.

Research Framework and Methods of Inquiry

Studies which focus on the effects of kindergarten on student achievement generally represent two trends. One aims to reduce the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers (Karweit, 1987; Azumi, 1990). This trend is evident in current reform efforts which concentrate on more academic and structured early learning and the integration of kindergarten curriculum with more advanced academic goals.

A second trend continues to stress the importance of socio-emotional development as a prerequisite and precursor to effective early childhood education. Research conducted in the District of Columbia schools (Marcon, 1994) found that by age 9, students who had attended overly academic kindergartens experienced higher rates of grade retention and maladaptive behavior. This study recommends that kindergarten continue to focus on the preparatory role it once had for social and emotional development, and that schools pursue efforts to develop innovative early childhood models with developmentally appropriate performance expectations and more active child initiated early learning experiences.

The New Beginnings initiative in Newark conforms to these recommendations. The research findings demonstrate that academic gains also occur in kindergarten programs which are structured around developmentally appropriate curriculum and child-centered classrooms. This conclusion is based on an analysis of data gathered using qualitative and quantitative methods in order to examine the impact of the New Beginnings initiative on curriculum, professional development and student outcomes. Within this context, the research was designed to answer

three questions: 1) What shifts occurred in program, curriculum and professional development? 2) What changes occurred in teacher attitudes and behavior? 3) What changes occurred in student outcomes?

Qualitative data included interviews with the Bank Street College New Beginnings Program Director, Newark Public Schools Early Childhood Curriculum Specialist, classroom observation data of the sixteen classes, transcriptions of focus groups with six Bank Street staff developers and with fifteen New Beginnings classroom teachers, and survey data completed by eleven New Beginnings teachers and a comparison cohort of ten teachers from the same schools. Evidence of change in students' social and problem solving skills came from observation and anecdotal data shared in the teachers' and staff developers' focus groups.

District skills tests in reading and math, which are curriculum based, were used to determine the success of the district's kindergarten program in preparing all students with developmentally appropriate academic skills. Performance in reading and math for 300 New Beginnings students was compared with the performance of a comparable cohort of 1000 kindergartners in non-restructured classrooms. Independent sample t-test analyses were conducted to compare overall program as well as school level differences.

Implementing the New Beginnings Model of Staff Development

The goals of the Newark Public Schools kindergarten program are outlined in the 1996 Kindergarten Curriculum Guide. The primary goal is "to teach children how to learn what they need to know and to create an excitement and a love for life and learning," with opportunities to:

- develop a positive self-image;
- cultivate and enhance individual abilities;
- develop competence in acquiring skills and understanding concepts;
- become independent and critical thinkers;
- develop creativity through the arts;
- expand their concept of the world; and
- problem solve and make independent decisions.

To achieve these objectives, the curriculum guide recommends that classrooms be organized as learning environments around non-permanent learning centers, and that curriculum be multicultural and organized in integrated thematic units. Of the three initiatives designed to help the district meet these goals in the 1996-97 academic year, New Beginnings was the most comprehensive. The other two initiatives were much more limited in scope, length, and training. With a curriculum compatible with the District's new kindergarten curriculum and an emphasis on teaching young children through age-appropriate hands-on experiences, New Beginnings provided the participating teachers with a variety of opportunities for growth and for change.

The New Beginnings teachers were invited to participate either by their principal or by their School Leadership Team (SLT) Assistant Superintendent. Although the numbers represented are small, a profile of teachers' academic degrees was constructed from the survey responses of eleven of the sixteen New Beginnings teachers and a sample of ten regular kindergarten teachers at the same schools. Refer to Table I below. The highest academic degree achieved by most teachers in both groups was the Bachelors Degree. While four of ten regular classroom teachers reported having Masters Degrees, none of the New Beginnings teachers reported having completed a Masters Degree. However, one of New Beginnings teachers had completed a Doctoral Degree.

Table I

Program	**Bachelors' Degree**	**Masters' Degree**	**Doctoral Degree**
New Beginnings Teachers	10		1
Regular Kindergarten Teachers	6	4	

New Beginning teachers not only had more years teaching experience -- an average of 16 years compared to 10.6, but also more years of experience teaching kindergarten in Newark. The average number of years both teaching kindergarten and teaching kindergarten in Newark was 7 years for New Beginnings teachers, as compared with five for the comparison group. However, again the sample size was small and did not represent all teachers.

Most important in acquainting the participating teachers with the Bank Street approach, was the mentor -- a staff developer from Bank Street -- each teacher was assigned. Underlying the approach are four principles as presented in the Bank Street College curriculum guide Explorations With Small Children (1992):

1. Work with children should be based on knowledge of child development, and especially of the interdependence of social, emotional, physical, and intellectual growth.

2. Individual children should be understood and evaluated through observations over time, through their works or products, and through their families and others who have worked with them.

3. A physical environment for children should be created that encourages their active participation in their own learning.

4. A social environment should be created that encourages a sense of community and values each individual in the community.

A key characteristic of this approach is to provide guidelines, resources, and recommendations, not "fail-safe recipes." It is expected that the specifics of any early childhood program will reflect the "uniqueness" of children, families and staff. The implication is that staff development should be based on process and the developing relationships between the mentors and the cooperating teachers, between the participating teachers, between the children and teachers and between the children themselves. This approach does not rely on isolated demonstrations or model lessons.

At the core of the New Beginnings staff development model was the development of relationships between the Bank Street staff developers who served as mentors and the participating teachers. By working with the teachers to devise their own applications of classroom management, activity centers, and theme-based curriculum, the mentors helped teachers make the transition from didactic to process teaching. Furthermore, this relationship mirrored the one that New Beginnings hoped to instill in the classroom between teachers and students. Just as the mentors wanted teachers to be active participants in the learning process, designing their own curriculums, so too, they wanted them to draw on their students' interests to create active learning environments in the kindergartens.

Each of the six mentors, one of whom was bilingual, was responsible for one, two, or three New Beginnings kindergartens. Mentors visited their teachers once a week assisting and advising the teacher in implementing the program's underlying principles. Mentors and teachers also communicated by phone. These calls were to review events that they had not had time to discuss during the mentor's visit, or to bring the mentors up-to-date on the outcome of jointly planned projects. Mentors also met with school administrators, acquainting them with the New Beginnings philosophy and goals.

In addition to the mentor, New Beginnings provided teachers with other learning experiences. These included visits to model classes at Bank Street and in Pittsburgh, the site of a previous Bank Street project; articles and books to read; opportunities to hear and work with the authors at Bank Street College workshops; workshops on topics such as art education, story-telling, block-building, social studies, theme integration, and children's emotional development; access to new materials and supplies, including books, manipulatives, clay, and cameras to enhance classroom environments and curriculum; and opportunities as a cohort to exchange ideas and experiences and learn from each other on a continuing basis.

Implementing the New Beginnings Approach in the Classroom

Each of the New Beginnings classrooms was organized with a meeting center; a reading center; a block center; an activity choice chart constructed in varying formats, sizes, and shapes; and with multiple and varied activity centers. Some activities depended on the physical features of the room. Smaller rooms had less space to devote to ongoing block building projects; rooms without sinks did not have extensive art projects.

As seen in classroom observations, **multiple activity centers** were the primary vehicles through which changes in teacher behavior and classroom organization took place. In most classrooms children chose the centers at which they wanted to work, thus enabling them to focus on one activity or to explore several. Once at a center, the children worked independently, by themselves or with others, and at their own pace. The teacher was likely to be a facilitator rather than an absolute authority. The number and type of activity centers varied from room to room, as did the activity centers which were open on a given day. Typical centers included, but were not limited to:

1. Art Projects Center
2. Reading Center - books - large and small
3. Block Area
4. Doll House Area
5. Dramatic Play Areas- puppet theater, dress-up, toy vehicles
6. Listening Area - headphones, tapes, music
7. Math Area - puzzles, small blocks, rods, cash register, money
8. Sand/Water Area
9. Science Area
10. Writing Area - journals, children's writing samples
11. Housekeeping
12. Manipulatives.

Theme-based curriculum was another vehicle through which change occurred. Themes, like the activity centers, varied in nature and implementation from class to class. Even the same theme could be interpreted differently depending on the teacher and the class. In several classrooms the theme was "Animals" or "Zoo Animals." The children read books about animals, real and pretend. They also took trips to the zoo and they practiced their observation and recall skills by writing and drawing about what they had seen. In one classroom, the children practiced counting from 1 to 100 using a wall poster they had made by cutting and pasting one hundred animal pictures. In another, they made graphs of who had what kinds of pets; in another, they made animal crackers, following a recipe on the wall. When gym was

canceled, the teacher led the children in mimicking animal movements. In another classroom project, children had recreated their neighborhood, including animals, with blocks as part of a thematic learning tool.

"Bread" was a prop used thematically in several classrooms in varied ways. Each New Beginnings kindergarten had received a basket with "play bread" of many types. Children learned about different kinds of bread, some of which they were familiar with -- hot dog rolls, sliced bread, pizza -- and others which they were not -- pumpernickel, pita bread, hard tack. They read books about bread, such as one about a pizza bakery. In one class, they visited a local bakery. The children conducted surveys about bread preferences. One teacher used the models of different types of bread to illustrate a map of the world with croissants from France and tacos from Mexico. In another classroom exercise bread was the object of scientific inquiry, with students answering the question, "What happens to bread after it is left out for a few days?" Baking bread was the object of a math lesson in measurement.

Block building was an important part of the New Beginnings curriculum. This hands-on activity was present in each of the sixteen classrooms. It offered the children many ways to improve their social, academic, and negotiating skills through exploring and recreating the world around them. When working in the block area, children could exercise choice, and work alone or with others. Sometimes on extended projects students had to problem-solve, as when they had to figure out how to get the blocks to balance or how to build a bridge. They used blocks in dramatic play, as when one child built a house, and then knocked out a window, explaining, "Look, this is how the robber got in!". They also grew emotionally, learning to shrug off disappointment when their creations collapsed prematurely.

Blocks were integrated in the curriculum to explore scientific and mathematical concepts such as categorizing, comparing and patterning. Children learned the geometric relationship of different block shapes; the order in which blocks had to be stacked to build a tower; and how much weight a block building could support. They mapped and photographed their constructions. In some classes, building in the block area was explicitly linked to the curricular theme. For example, in a class using the theme "Zoo Animals," the children used blocks to construct their own zoo and did research in the classroom library to find out what kind of play food they needed to provide to the animals in their block enclosures.

Teachers found many creative techniques to involve the children in active learning through implementing the learning centers and integrated thematic curricular units:

1) Books were widely used.

- Books were on display in every classroom, many with

multicultural themes, and were arranged in centers accessible to the children. In some classrooms the children had made their own books, both individually and together. For example, a class studying "Zoo Animals" had made a pop-up book of the animals; this book was on display and available for the children to read along with other books.

- In another class, children had borrowed books for the weekend; almost all had remembered to return them on the Monday morning we were in their classroom.

- In yet another kindergarten, children were grouped in small reading groups. Each group had a turn reading with the teacher, and each child took turns reading aloud from a different book. If a child found an unfamiliar word, they sounded it out. Then the teacher, instead of saying right or wrong, would ask the other children in the group their opinion, "Is that right?"

2) Children were given many opportunities to practice writing.

- In several classrooms children in the Writing activity center could use the "Word Wall" in their compositions or journals. In one room words on the Word Wall -- at the children's eye level -- described jonquils in a vase; in another there were pairs of rhymes from the children like " tie die" "hat cat" and "lie pie."

- In one classroom children practiced writing by spelling and writing the names of the absent children on the blackboard.

- In another, children wrote the months and numbers themselves in the date on the wall calendar.

- In many rooms the art work on display included words and writing.

3) Teachers found different ways to acknowledge the children's work and to make the classroom belong to the children as much as to the teachers.

- Children's work was on display in most classrooms, as were photographs documenting past projects. In some, the children's work was also on display outside the room.

- In some classrooms each project on display had the work of each child represented, so that, for example, when the children made body outlines, each child's outlines was tacked on the wall outside the classroom. When they drew houses, each child's drawing was displayed on the wall.

- In a classroom in which children were making paper doll representations of themselves, the teacher made sure that the yarn available for hair came in all colors and textures, and that there was material available to make a doll scarf for the girl who always kept her head covered.

4) Teachers taught math and measurement in new ways.

- One method was through following simple recipes. On the walls of several classrooms were recipes for play dough, for batidos, and for muffins.

- Another classroom had made graphs, measured in blocks.

- One teacher used music to illustrate fractions.

- For a planting project, the teacher had many types of seeds, and scales. The children arranged them in size order, and then weighed them, learning that the biggest seeds were not necessarily the heaviest.

- In another classroom in which "Exploring Our Community" was the theme, at a "neighborhood market" items were "sold" with marked

"pretend" prices, so that children could practice using money. Similarly, in a classroom in which "Bread" was a theme, at a "Bread Stand" various kinds of play breads were "sold."

5) Teachers taught the children to develop analytic skills by asking and answering questions about the world around them.

- In one classroom, posted on the wall were the questions "What are we going to see?" and "What did we see?" with the children's answers filled in about a recent trip to the zoo. Other questions posed were: "What do we know about pumpkins?" "What do we know about apples?"

- In another classroom, copies of prepared survey forms were available to the children. If they had questions such as "What food do you like?" they could ask each other and tally and graph the answers.

- Other rooms had butterfly hatching projects, aquariums, and -- in one -- two pet rabbits.

- When the children worked on art projects, like creating a dinosaur from clay, the teacher helped them take the next step, by asking questions that made them compare what they were making with the object they had in mind, such as "Does your dinosaur need teeth?"

6) Teachers found nonjudgmental ways to call on children, and to move them between activities.

- In one class, rather than calling on children directly, the teacher drew names from a hat to determine whose turn it was to hold the pointer, and to tell the class their "news," such as a birthday or a trip to the grocery store.

- Another teacher called children to line up by naming different colors that they were wearing, arranging the order so she was able to give a child having some difficulty special attention. By calling

his colors last, he and she could touch base alone as the others were leaving.

- The teacher gave a child who had yet to complete a project a choice, saying to her, "Do you want to do it now, when you'll only have ten minutes, or would you rather have more time in the afternoon?"

- The teacher signaled a change of activity by blinking the lights, and putting on music.

7) Teachers were creative in making use of limited space.

- In one class, the "Art Gallery" was a clothesline strung through the room at the children's eye level.

- In another room, with limited storage space, children kept their possessions in their own backpacks, hung on the back of their chairs.

- In several rooms the teachers had no personal desk; in others, it was very small.

- One teacher set up a "Parent's Corner," made from stacked crates, in which she provided parents with notes and information.

- Another teacher used the space just outside her door to describe the main features of the Bank Street philosophy.

Impact on Teaching Strategies, Behavior, and Professional Development

In the focus group, and in their anonymous self administered written survey, teachers were asked about the impact which New Beginnings had on professional development; on teaching goals and methods; on assessment of student learning; and on benefits to students. As a result of the program, they reported change and growth.

New Beginnings teachers reported that their roles and teaching styles had changed:

- This year, the learning has come from the children; my classroom is more student-centered.
- I'm not the center of the children's attention anymore (or don't feel the need to be).
- I can now trust in myself that children will learn on their own at centers with appropriate learning manipulatives.
- I feel more relaxed in the New Beginnings Environment.
- I can see and observe them teach each other or discover on their own.
- I plan out theme lessons and prepare centers for them - it's a lot of work.

Several described a change in teaching approach:

- I've become more of a facilitator.
- It has changed from didactic to process teaching.
- I do little direct instruction.
- My students do not see me as an authoritative figure with all the rules and answers, but see themselves as members of a group able to share thoughts and ideas.

Different teachers found different aspects of the program to have the most influence on their teaching. Individuals mentioned:

- Learning new ways and techniques to reach most children.
- Feeling good about teaching and how I'm doing as a teacher.
- Happy to be given the learning strategies and materials needed to stimulate young children.
- Becoming acquainted with "thinking" centers.
- Meeting with teachers involved with the project and working with my Bank Street mentor.

- Seeing the program in action in Pittsburgh, which was essential to the whole program.
- Getting permission to grow by allowing me room and time to try new ways to learn.

Most agreed that working intensively with the mentors was very important to their ability to implement the program goals. They looked forward to the mentor's weekly visit and they appreciated the hands-on help the mentor gave them in arranging their rooms and helping them carry out projects. Only a few teachers found the weekly visits burdensome and would have scheduled them less frequently.

A major shift reported by most of the New Beginnings teachers was that they had learned new ways in which to allow the children to participate more fully in classroom routines and to take responsibility for their own learning at their own pace. Their roles had changed. The focus had shifted from them, the teachers, to the work being done. At the same time, teaching had become less tedious, and more exciting and fulfilling.

Although teachers said they were overwhelmed at the beginning of the year, by the end of the year, they were all enthusiastic about the improvement in their teaching and self-confidence, and in the difference their new style of teaching had made for their students. Despite the initial difficulties with pedagogical shifts and program startup delays and inconveniences, all of the participating teachers said they would willingly participate in the program if they were to have the choice again.

Changes in the Instructional Model

In a number of the areas in which both regular and New Beginnings teachers were surveyed, such as teacher goals for learning, teaching strategies, and assessment methods, the two groups differed in their current practices and professional development experiences. For example, regular classroom teachers referred more often to single session professional development and training workshops, to didactic teaching, and to workbook and skills based learning materials and assessment. New Beginnings teachers spoke more often of ongoing mentoring and colleague support, and of process learning that was child centered and activity based. In the area of student assessment, they spoke of student observation and conversation, and of children's work samples to assess individual student growth and progress. The differences likely reflect both present practices and what were perceived as accessible options and opportunities.

New Beginnings teachers more consistently expressed and demonstrated empirical

understanding of child centered learning and assessment and a familiarity with the teaching styles and classroom organization that support its implementation. This first year's experiences represented fundamental shifts for most of them. The comparative survey findings from the two groups, even though based upon small numbers of program and comparison group teachers, were supported by other evaluation data - i.e. the before and after teaching experiences reported by New Beginnings teachers in the focus group interviews and from classroom observations of the New Beginnings model.

Impact on Student Outcomes

New Beginnings students benefitted academically as well as socially. As the teachers noted, students displayed increased school readiness, as compared to the teachers' previous classes. Students were able to work well independently and in groups, and had developed skills to problem solve as well as negotiate and resolve peer conflict. They also performed well on standardized tests. Overall, the positive outcomes and beneficial impact of the New Beginnings initiative on students was demonstrated in three ways: from their test scores, through the researchers' classroom observations, and from data provided by their teachers and the New Beginnings mentors.

1) Academic gains

Spring 1997 performance data in reading and math skills was compared for students attending New Beginnings kindergarten classes with performance data for a comparable cohort of students attending regular kindergarten classes. Student performance was measured by % of items correct in reading and mathematics. These skills tests were used to determine the success of the kindergarten program in preparing students with developmentally appropriate academic skills, and to assess how well students mastered the skills and abilities which were covered in the District's kindergarten curriculum. At three schools with large bilingual populations, test data for similar bilingual cohorts were selected for the comparative analyses.

Table 2 shows district level outcomes with comparisons in reading and math performance on the District Kindergarten Test. The group of New Beginnings students significantly outperformed the control group of students in reading and math. In reading, the New Beginnings students demonstrated a mean of 89.2 percent of items correct, compared with a mean of 83.1 percent of items correct for the control group, a statistically significant difference of 6.1 percentage points. In math, the New Beginnings students demonstrated a mean of 88.1 percent of items correct compared with a mean of 81.8 percent of items correct for the control, a statistically significant difference of 6.3 percentage points.

Table 3 shows school level comparisons of student outcomes in reading. Nine of sixteen New Beginnings classes, or 56%, significantly outperformed the control groups at those schools, and 75% of New Beginnings classes demonstrated a higher score by at least 1.5 percentage points.

Table 4 shows school level comparisons in math. Seven of sixteen, or 44% of New Beginnings classes did significantly better than their control groups, with 81% demonstrating a higher score by at least 1.5 percentage points. As with the District level comparisons, the consistently smaller standard deviations for the New Beginnings classes suggest that not only did the New Beginnings classes significantly outperform the control group in both skills areas, but also performed more consistently closer to the mean, with a smaller spread in scores.

Table 2

A Comparison of Student Performance 1997

New Beginnings with Regular Kindergarten

Content Area	New Beginnings	Control Group
Reading		
Mean -% Correct	89.2*	83.1
Standard Deviation	9.8	14.2
No. of Students	268	930
Math		
Mean -% Correct	88.1*	81.8
Standard Deviation	10.6	17.5
No. of Students	289	928

*Significant at .001

TABLE 3

SCHOOL LEVEL COMPARISON OF KINDERGARTEN PERFORMANCE: 1997
NEW BEGINNINGS WITH SAME SCHOOL CONTROL GROUP
READING

Schools	New Beginnings			Control Group			New Beginnings Differences
	Mean % correct	SD	N	Mean % correct	SD	N	
Abington	95.5*	6.7	28	84.5	14.7	68	+
G. W. Carver	90.9*	7.5	28	83.2	12.6	108	+
Clinton Ave.	77.5	11.3	25	81.6	15.0	66	-
Fifteenth Ave.	89.6*	6.7	16	81.1	12.6	28	+
**Dr. E. A. Flagg (Spanish)	85.0*	7.9	22	75.3	15.6	178	+
**Franklin (English)	70.1	16.2	23	65.5	15.4	52	+
Lincoln	92.2*	5.4	16	83.4	12.2	44	+
Madison	84.9	11.3	12	91.3	8.4	62	-
Morton	91.8*	7.6	20	81.0	12.7	45	+
Newton	95.8	4.0	19	96.8	2.4	37	-
**Oliver St. (English)	83.8	16.2	20	82.1	16.8	38	+
Quitman St.	89.1*	8.4	17	82.0	11.8	74	+
So. 17th St.	93.4*	8.6	19	82.4	14.8	70	+
Louise A. Spencer	89.9*	7.1	22	80.8	14.6	116	+
Sussex Ave.	85.6	9.0	21	80.3	16.9	32	+
Thirteenth Ave.	82.2	14.0	18	83.4	13.9	66	-
							12/16 (75%) +

* Statistically significant at. 05

** Limited English proficient students were tested in English or Spanish.

TABLE 4

SCHOOL LEVEL COMPARISON OF KINDERGARTEN PERFORMANCE: 1997
NEW BEGINNINGS WITH SAME SCHOOL CONTROL GROUP
MATH

Schools	New Beginnings			Control Group			New Beginnings Differences
	Mean % correct	SD	N	Mean % correct	SD	N	
Abington	94.2*	8.1	28	85.3	13.7	68	+
G. W. Carver	86.4	9.3	28	86.5	11.5	108	nd
Clinton Ave.	81.1*	11.6	25	54.5	29.6	66	+
Fifteenth Ave.	87.7	7.5	16	83.3	12.7	28	+
**Dr. E. A. Flagg (Spanish)	81.7	10.6	22	78.1	17.5	178	+
**Franklin (English)	80.9*	13.6	23	65.2	14.8	52	+
Lincoln	87.3*	14.1	16	83.2	15.2	44	+
Madison	88.3	11.3	12	89.9	7.9	62	-
Morton	88.0*	9.2	20	80.4	12.1	45	+
Newton	95.3	4.4	19	93.6	6.7	36	+
**Oliver St. (English)	89.2	4.7	20	90.3	10.0	38	-
Quitman St.	88.3	12.4	17	82.3	15.7	74	+
So. 17th St.	89.1*	11.1	19	78.1	18.7	70	+
Louise A. Spencer	91.6*	7.6	22	82.9	14.3	116	+
Sussex Ave.	83.7	14.2	21	80.2	18.5	32	+
Thirteenth Ave.	85.0	9.0	18	81.2	14.4	66	+
							13/16 (81%) +

* Statistically significant at. 05

** Limited English Proficient students were tested in English or Spanish.

2) Social gains

In classrooms observed in which the Bank Street approach was most apparent, children looked as often to one another for ideas, approval, and solutions to problems, work or social, as they did to the teachers or other adults present. In these classrooms, it was observed that the children took charge, or were able to continue on their own activities without the teacher's constant attention. In one classroom, children worked independently at learning centers while the teacher was occupied in assessing one child using a checklist. In another, the children who had been reading to the group from a large oversize book with the help of the teacher continued sounding out words on their own during whole-group morning meeting time when the teacher was called away. One child read aloud, another turned the pages, just as they had before the interruption.

Children moved from one activity center to another without having to ask permission. Most classrooms had a child accessible system of regulating activity center choices and the number of children at each activity center. Through the use of name cards, or bracelets, or clothespins, children themselves exercised choice. They could see which centers had openings and had only to move their name, or exchange their bracelet, or do something similar to indicate a change in choice without involving the teacher or another adult.

Because the children could see and understand the charts that showed the activity center assignments, and because they were allowed to freely move around as long as they followed the rules, the kindergartners learned to negotiate and problem solve with one another. In one classroom visited, the children were negotiating their disputes about block building, agreeing on what to build, how to build it, and whether to build separately or together. In another instance, a group of boys agreed that no girls would be allowed in their "clubhouse." At first the girls seemed to accept this decision; a bit later, they came back and convinced the boys to let them "visit."

In another classroom, the aide challenged a girl, asking her, "Where are you supposed to be?" The girl, having moved from her original activity center choice, replied "Blocks". She then went to the chart to show the aide that there was room in the block area, and that she had exchanged her original bracelet for one of the proper color. In another instance, a girl playing with manipulatives told a boy in blocks, pointing to the choice chart, "You're supposed to be here," meaning she wanted him to come play with her. He understood, and came along.

Among other student-initiated behaviors leading to school readiness observed during the classroom visits were:

- Children took their own Polaroids of their buildings.

- Children helped each other on with smocks during art and water play; they did not need an adult to help.

- Children had assigned jobs like setting up the sand/water area, or sorting name cards or clearing the tables; they did them well without being reminded.

- Children prepared the snack. They took food from the refrigerator, and even cut up apples to distribute. Other children swept up after snack. These tasks were pre-assigned; the children knew whose turn it was without being told.

- After a demonstration by the teacher, each child planted a seed in an individual container. Children were then expected to, on their own, cycle through the planting table during the activity period. With only a few reminders, each child came to take a turn when space was available, putting dirt in a cup; then adding seeds, water, and name labels; and then putting the cup on the window sill to get sunlight. The only mishap was some spilled dirt; the girl responsible, by herself, got a sponge and cleaned up.

- Children helped each other form a line to go to lunch. When one child deliberately knocked over another's block work, the children behind him in line picked up the fallen blocks and fixed the building.

- Children took out their own sleep mats and put them down, covering them with fitted sheets.

- Each child had a pencil, paper, and a clipboard, on which to write "News" to be shared with the class during morning meeting time.

- When an absent classmate returned, the children reached out to welcome him back. When a new child came, they greeted her individually and tried to make her feel comfortable.

- Children toileted themselves, without asking permission.

3) Increased School Readiness

In conversation, in focus groups, and in the survey questionnaires, the teachers and mentors described changes and growth in the children that were both academic and social in nature. One teacher said that it was the first year in her eight years of teaching that all students in her class had mastered the alphabet and numbers up to 20. Another described changes in the children and their relationship to her and to one another:

> My students have responded to the idea that they are active learners and participants in our classroom by making suggestions of ways to set up centers, code tables, and develop units of study. They do not see me as an authoritarian figure with all the answers, but rather they see themselves as members of a group, able to share thoughts and ideas. They are problem solvers and see me as a person of authority without being authoritarian... we learn from each other.

Above all, they described the children's eagerness to be in school. In some instances, there were fewer absences than previous years. One teacher said,

> [As a result of my more child-centered teaching] my students have blossomed. Most are eagerly waiting for me to open the door and start the day. You don't see them dragging their feet. They are happy to be in this class.

The mentors were also eloquent about the changes they observed in the children. One mentor noted that a teacher had just instituted the practice of letting children choose at which activity center they would be working:

> In the morning the kids have begun to anticipate what is going to be happening. They see that time as their time. They sit for much less time in the morning for their morning ritual. There's a sense that they are going to be involved in what's going to be happening with them. To me that's an enormous change because they have ownership of what's happening. The children know what's available. They anticipate what they're going to be doing. They're not just waiting for the adults to tell them what to do ... and the

> kids talk to each other more than they used to at the beginning of the year. There's real **pro-action** on the part of the kids, and a real ownership on their part.

Another Bank Street mentor described the changes in a classroom this way:

> In one classroom I see a lot of wonderful things that are very concrete. For example, when I first got there ... the way children were chosen to go get anything -- Go get your coat, Get in line -- was a tough way for little kids. "Let's see," the teacher would say, looking around, "Who was good today?". You would see little kids collecting themselves to try to present this image, and at the same time one could also see the disappointment and sadness of not being chosen. So I had a discussion early on about ways to get kids to move ... We were studying birds, so now the kids are identified by the birds they are studying at their tables. Blue Jays, get your coats! Eagles... It's just lifted to another level of value and sense of who you are, taking away this right-and-wrong thing and who was good and who was bad.

A third commented about her classrooms:

> There's a tone..the teacher doesn't have to be a referee. The kids don't want to leave work centers, because they're really engaged and involved. There is deep discussion, whereas before it seemed peripheral, not really deep. The conversation used to be kind of activity-based, without focus, but now the children really try to figure out and analyze what is happening. The quality of the language is really different in all the classrooms, in terms of their work and attending to it.

Program Constraints

Problematic styles of classroom management and organization, however, persisted in some classrooms. Although a great deal of child-centered activity occurred in most of the New Beginnings classrooms observed, it did not take place in all of them, particularly in those whose teachers had a more authoritarian teaching style. Among the problems noted were that:

1) Children had to wait too long to participate in meaningful activity.

- In a few classrooms, the children did not negotiate or problem solve by themselves. Instead they looked to the teacher to settle disagreements. In one instance where the children could not agree about seating arrangements, the teacher stepped in to assign each seat individually. Potentially productive time was also lost when children had to wait for the teacher's instructions instead of proceeding on their own.

- Although all classrooms had activity charts and allowed the children to make choices, some systems were more efficient than others. In some classrooms the children were called on one at a time to make a choice and their classmates had to wait until everyone had chosen a center.

- Children working on a craft project had to wait for the teacher to assemble the framework rather than doing it themselves.

- Children had to wait and ask permission to go to the bathroom, even though the bathroom was in their classroom.

- In another classroom, the teacher rewarded "good" behavior by awarding points, an exercise which fueled competition among the children and made the teacher -- not the work -- the center of attention.

- During one half-hour in a morning activity meeting time, the teacher was interrupted four times for non-urgent requests by the public address system and by the principal.

- In two of the classes, a scheduled activity did not take place as planned and without appropriate advance notice to the teacher. At some schools these unplanned changes were likely not uncommon. In one instance, the schedule was changed at the last minute, when the art teacher was reassigned to monitor testing. In the other, a library program from outside the schools did not come to the room as arranged.

2) Children had limited access to materials and/or activities, sometimes because of poor classroom organization.

- In one classroom, items like manipulatives, coat hooks, and bookshelves were placed too high for the children to reach without help.

- In one room, the sand and water tables were covered, and so not accessible.

- In one classroom, the activity chart was too high and too small for the children to be able to see and manipulate themselves.

- Very little of the children's work was displayed; or student work was displayed too high for the children to see it.

- Classroom space was poorly organized.

- Old, unused, and dusty computer or audio equipment took up space that could have been put to better use.

- Several classrooms had nonworking equipment, such as wall clocks, radiators and refrigerators.

- Children were crowded together in a corner for whole group lessons, rather than using the entire space available.

- Wall posters meant to designate activity centers with pictures and captions such as "Art Center" or "Music" were used only as wall decorations, and were not placed near the centers they described.

- In some instances the color coding used on the activity chart was not carried through to the centers. "Red," for example, might be used to designate the Art Center, but there would be no red color to mark the center itself.

- In one classroom, blocks were kept in three separate areas.

3) Not all classrooms had focused theme-based curriculums.

- About a third of the New Beginnings classrooms had no identified themes at all.

- Some teachers were implementing partial themes, like "Shapes" or overly broad themes, like "Change."

- Others saw "theme-based" curriculum as antithetical to "skills-based," and so taught more traditional curricular skills based units. In some, school administrators held teachers responsible for detailed lesson plans, with units more closely aligned with district curriculum guidelines.

- Still other teachers were planning to implement theme-based curriculum once they became more comfortable with the Bank Street approach.

4) Teachers reported conflict between curriculum and student assessment priorities.

- All of the teachers reported feeling pressure to teach their students the skills they would need to master on the district tests administered in April, even as they voiced reservations about the value of the test.

- One committed teacher described the inconsistency she faced:

> I do not have freedom to implement New Beginnings to the fullest. The Bank Street Program is a social-studies based learning program that I am supposed to develop according to the needs of the children. It is a thematic approach that provides children with everyday learning experiences. On the one hand, I am told to implement New Beginnings and, on the other, I am held responsible for teaching all the curriculum in the Curriculum

Guide, completing checklists from programs I am not implementing (Scholastic, Scott Foresman), homework charts, and, most importantly District Testing. These are not part of the philosophy of New Beginnings. I hope next year clarifies what is expected of me as the teacher/facilitator... Please end standardized testing in Kindergarten!

- Teachers often alluded to the tension created by conflicting demands. While still quite positive about the New Beginnings initiative, they urged that next year directives from the central office, their school administration, and New Beginnings be consistent. Concurrent with meeting district mandates, most New Beginnings teachers were using alternative methods of assessment, including an assessment portfolio with samples of the children's work throughout the year. An index card file on which teachers documented each child's growth (academic, social, cognitive, and physical) from September to June; kindergarten checklists which chart mastery or nonmastery of specific skills taught; student journals and work sample folders; and parent-teacher conferences were some of the alternative assessment methods in use.

- The Bank Street mentors were unanimous in recommending that the district not use standardized testing for kindergartners, and pleased that the district had created a task force to investigate alternatives to be in place for the following school year. They felt that the district's current kindergarten testing was developmentally inappropriate in expecting mastery of concepts like time and money. They also saw philosophical, practical and administrative problems with it. One commented:

> Some of the anxiety I saw the kids exhibiting about test taking was what I had problems with. It's not the way to go; it's unnecessary, and the data that you get doesn't tell you anything.

- Another mentor said that New Beginnings issued a challenge to the teachers regarding testing:

You're in the New Beginnings program but you have to do the curriculum the way everyone does, you're going to be measured the way everyone else is. Are you up to the challenge of delivering it in a different way -- through materials, through play, through using the literature but not the little

sequences in the reading series? If you really are up for it, you're going to see that your kids are going to do okay on this test. The teachers did complain... but the feedback when they called me afterwards was "I can't believe how well they're doing, and I didn't even have test practice!"

- According to another mentor:

  What stands out for me is that the teachers exhibited such personal anxiety. That personal anxiety was an evaluation of self...initially when they were looking through that first round of scores they thought the kids doing well is an evaluation of me ...it's the same phenomenon for the principals, and the whole system is built on that, and that is somewhat depressing to me as a teacher.

5) Classes were overcrowded.

- Although the Newark Public Schools Kindergarten Curriculum Guide recommends that class size not exceed twenty children, that classes have a teacher and full-time teacher aide, only two of the sixteen classrooms had twenty or fewer children enrolled.

- Twenty-nine children were enrolled in the physically smallest classroom we visited.

6) Classroom Aides were insufficiently trained.

- When asked what support they most needed, almost all the teachers said they needed a reliable aide trained in early childhood education.
- Although fourteen of the sixteen classrooms visited had an aide, many were not full-time and most were not formally trained. In interviews and in the focus group, the teachers described problems both in getting and working with their aides. In one classroom we observed, the aide was helping with a difficult child, sitting and reading with him as he calmed himself. However, in other classrooms we visited, the aide typically was the disciplinarian, sometimes intimidating the children.

7) Cramped, overcrowded classrooms and other building and scheduling constraints hampered program implementation.

- Cramped and overcrowded small rooms, lack of sinks and bathrooms in their rooms, late lunch periods, lack of outdoor play facilities for recess, and last-minute room alterations all hindered a few teachers' efforts to accomplish as much as they would have liked.

- In the focus group, a teacher said,

  I would rather have a bathroom in my room than all these materials, or a bigger room. They were painting and changing my room after the kids were there. I never could catch up. Plus there was no storage space in my room. I was up on a ladder the day before school began trying to put stuff away without storage space. I'm not afraid of new things, I'm not afraid of hard work, but I was just overwhelmed.

8) Teachers expressed concerns about inadequate supports for parents, teachers, and children.

- Some teachers would have liked more ways to translate the program for parents.

- Almost all teachers would have liked a "program colleague" in their school. Some teachers reported that they were resented by some of their colleagues because the other kindergarten teachers in their school were not receiving the same materials and teaching supports. Some had shared Bank Street supplies and resources with their colleagues.

- Almost every teacher reported having "special needs" children who had not received any or adequate social services during the year. The mentors too, in their focus group, mentioned that they saw a need for an expanded and expedited referral system for special needs children and their families.

Conclusions

As a three year collaborative project developed between Bank Street College and the Newark Public Schools, New beginnings was designed to bring together the "forces" of reform, namely curriculum, staff development, assessment, and classroom management to effect progressive restructuring of early childhood classrooms (Bank St., 1996). There already have been several promising outcomes during the first year of implementation:

- New Beginnings students exhibited greater autonomy and ownership of their learning, were better able to work independently and in groups, and developed skills which enabled them to negotiate and resolve peer conflict.
- New Beginnings students showed statistically significant gains on standardized tests compared to a control group of their peers.
- The collaborative mentoring model worked well for teachers with different teaching philosophies, methodological approaches, and teaching styles and strengths, and for students with varied abilities and developmental readiness.

Some issues remain to be addressed:

- Although activity centers and child centered learning was widely adopted by New Beginnings teachers, the theme-based social studies curriculum was unevenly implemented, perhaps due to some conflicting directives from the Central Office and lack of school-level local administrative support.
- Conflicts and constraints experienced during the first year's implementation with new approaches to teaching and assessment need to be resolved.
- An important area of concern is assisting teachers understand the emotional needs of their children and ways to help children cope with the traumatic events in their lives.

Nonetheless, the early success of New Beginnings is extremely promising for the Newark Public schools, whose students have been under-served and consistently disadvantaged academically. Other studies have suggested that efforts to improve the quality of early childhood programs must provide staff development and curriculum which emphasize child-centered learning, which challenge the rigidity of traditional classroom teaching roles and which challenge children to develop social and academic problem solving strategies and skills (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

The New Beginnings initiative, as implemented thus far in the Newark Public schools, is an excellent example of this model. Our research findings strongly support the efficacy of this approach to kindergarten reform. Our findings suggest that the grounding of this program in a practice model based on strong collaborative staff development and administrative support, on a child centered learning experience model, and on developmentally appropriate performance based assessment methods, has implications for restructuring initiatives at all early childhood levels in the District, and beyond. Furthermore, by extension, by encouraging children to be active learners in their classrooms, the New Beginnings model prepares them to use social and academic problem-solving skills to be active participants and responsible citizens in the larger world around them.

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